



Merton Citizens

NEWSLETTER

Merton Citizens is the local chapter of the nation-wide organisation Citizens UK that aims to strengthen civic society and ensure citizens' voices and needs are heard and considered by decision-makers.

The Merton Citizens Alliance is made up of 13 institutions from across the borough, including schools, religious institutions and non-profit organisations that work together towards a common interest. Following an extensive Listening Campaign and Accountability Assembly, we have met the leader of the council to discuss the four key issues affecting our local communities.

Connect with us!

If you are interested in getting your voice heard or getting involved in any of our projects please get in touch with Vitória Russo Gaino, the local Merton Citizens organiser: vitoria.russo-gaino@citizensuk.org. And find out more about Merton Citizens on our website (<https://linktr.ee/MertonCitizens>) or on Twitter ([@mertoncitizens](https://twitter.com/mertoncitizens)).



Mental Health

Working with NHS trusts the Merton Mental Health team has had some major wins. In 2018, starting from discussions with students at Wimbledon College and St Mark's Academy and spreading to other institutions, the team realised that mental health struggles were widespread in the borough, with many not being able to access mental health services due to long waiting lists.

The work that started in Merton expanded to a South London-wide project connecting three NHS Mental Health Trusts with Citizens groups across multiple boroughs (www.southlondonlistens.org). One of the fruits of this is the development of "Be Well Hubs". The idea is that any community organisation can become a "Be Well Hub". Organisations will be able to train members as Mental Health Champions within the organisations and will receive ongoing support, to help equip communities to signpost people to local mental health services and reduce stigma.

At our most recent Assembly, local party leaders committed to supporting Be Well Hubs and mental health champion training. Training opportunities for this have now started, so if your organisation would like to get involved please do contact us using the details below.



Cost of Living and Living Wage

Higher than the legally-mandated National Minimum Wage, the Living Wage is calculated to ensure that people have enough money to get by with London's fast-rising living costs. Merton currently has 50 accredited Living Wage employers in the area. However, nearly one-quarter of jobs in our borough, or 16,000 people, are still being paid below the Living Wage.

At our most recent Assembly, we were pleased that the Leader of the Council committed to having Merton Council become an accredited Living Wage employer. This will help to lift many local Merton residents out of low pay and set an example for other employers in the borough.



Housing

Merton clearly has a housing crisis – with rising rents and owning a house becoming ever more inaccessible, accommodation in the borough is hard to secure. This means that families who have lived in the borough for decades are now being separated and moving away whilst many remain in poor-quality, overcrowded and badly maintained rented housing. Others are in temporary accommodation or on the street. There are over 9,000 people on the Merton Council housing waiting list, and there is an urgent need for more truly affordable housing which requires public sector input.

Working with people from across Merton with different levels of housing needs, we have identified the following priorities within housing in the borough:

1. Raising housing standards by using enforcement procedures effectively for rented properties and introducing landlord licensing for private sector rented homes.
2. More affordable housing: new developments on council-owned land to consist of social and affordable housing at rents that reflect local incomes.
3. Have more and better accommodation solutions for homeless people, and improve the relationships between the council's housing team and those in housing need.

At our most recent Assembly, local party leaders committed to working with Merton Citizens to deliver more affordable housing, better enforcement of health and safety standards and to improve the relationships between the council's housing team and those in housing need.



Welcome

One of the core groups within Merton Citizens has been supporting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Merton was a pioneering borough in Community Sponsorship as Raynes Park Community Church (the Salvation Army) became the first group in London to welcome a refugee family through the scheme. We now have three families living in Merton and a further application has been accepted by the Home Office.

The group has set up a Welcome Network which meets regularly with local organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees. The group also campaigned successfully for Merton Council to become a member of the Lift the Ban coalition.

Over a six-month period, we conducted a listening campaign to better understand the issues affecting refugees and asylum seekers and our findings were written into a Sanctuary Strategy to support Merton Council to become a Borough of Sanctuary. During Refugee Week, we celebrated the contributions of refugees and asylum seekers in the country and presented our Sanctuary Strategy to the Deputy Council Leader, Cllr. Eleanor Stringer, in an event with over 100 people in attendance. We are currently working towards putting the Sanctuary Strategy into place in Merton whilst continuing to listen to the voices of asylum seekers and refugees in an environment which is constantly changing.

If you would like to find out any more information please contact Tom Underwood at tomunderwood@hotmail.com.

